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# A Contemporary Theology of the Vows

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## A CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF THE VOWS

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This article is entitled "a theology of the vows" in order to call attention at the outset to the difference between the Gospel reality of religious life and the human effort, called theology, by which we seek to understand and articulate that reality. There will never be a totally adequate theology of religious life (or of the vows), but the inadequacy, and at times even the falsity, of our understanding and articulation can not destroy or diminish religious life as a gift of Jesus Christ to the Church. Nevertheless, the efforts we make to understand religious life and to make it understandable to our contemporaries profoundly affect the human experience and expression of this gift in the Church and in the world. The glory of theology is its ministerial relationship to the ultimate truth of Revelation; and poverty of theology is its never to be overcome inadequacy and relativity in relation to the truth which it seeks to serve. The present theological effort, therefore, is nothing more than an effort to re-articulate the meaning of the vows for our own time.

### Introduction

The history of religious life clearly reveals two important facts regarding the vows: that religious have always made public profession of vows;<sup>1</sup> that the specific vows professed have not always been the same ones<sup>2</sup> and that the meaning of the individual vows has varied in different religious families, periods, and places.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that it is not only permissible to re-examine the meaning of the vows as they are being professed and lived by twentieth century American religious, but really necessary to do so if we are to remain faithful to the tradition of religious life in the Church.

No one who experienced Catholic life prior to Vatican II would deny that the ecclesial context of contemporary religious life is massively different from that of pre-conciliar times. The single factor in the conciliar reform and renewal which has most profoundly affected religious life would seem to be the position taken by the Council on the relationship between the Church and the world. The pastoral constitution Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World) represents a real change and development of doctrine which is complex and which should not be treated with naïveté. But it would not be inaccurate to say that in Vatican II the Church abandoned an essentially defensive and antagonistic attitude toward the world and assumed a stance of acceptance, involvement, and solidarity.

The Council's joyful affirmation of the reality and significance of the Incarnation for the Church was profoundly evangelical, but it



placed religious life under the necessity of completely reformulating itself. Religious life, at least since the fourth century, has understood itself almost as an institutionalization of the world-transcending dimension of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> The first expression of this world-transcendence (which so easily and so often became world-denial) was the flight from the city to the desert. Later, flight was transmuted into the separation effected by cloister. Still later, when physical cloister gave way under the pressure of the apostolate a subtle but effective substitution replaced grills and walls with a total subculture that made religious simply unassimilable in any ordinary human situation except those in which they were officially representing the hierarchical and institutional Church to the laity.

The Church, by expressing its slowly matured and radically new conviction that the world is not the enemy but the raw material of the Reign of God and that, therefore, the Church is and should be in, with, and for the world, participating in its struggles for the transformation of humankind, has made an institutionalization of world-transcendence (to say nothing of world-denial) not only useless but illegitimate. Religious, whether they like it or not, must be in, with, and for the world as the Church now recognizes itself to be. This has enormous implications in the practical and in the theoretical domains. The practical implications are becoming evident in the life-style and ministry of religious. But the gap is widening between an official theory of religious life that is still largely pre-conciliar<sup>5</sup> and a practice which is based more on Gaudium et Spes than on Perfectae Caritatis.

One of the major results for religious of the Council's launching of the Church into the world is the crumbling of the institutional structures which have enabled religious life to function as a "closed system," running on an independent, if not contradictory, track from "the world." Within their own communities and institutions religious could define reality as they wished and the definitions were unquestioned. Religious could say, for example, that poverty means dependence by permission and is perfectly compatible with corporate wealth and personal comfort, or that true freedom is found in abdication of one's personal will to that of a superior who, even when wrong, speaks with the voice of God, and no one questioned the truth of these positions. Religious could decide which apostolic works they were going to do and no one challenged these priorities.

The crumbling of the structures which effectively separated religious from the world has made it virtually impossible to maintain the closed system. The subculture of religious life is disintegrating. What religious do and say is no longer safe from telling criticism by the larger society. The criticism makes sense to many religious who, themselves, can no longer take seriously the 1950's definitions of the vows or accept unquestioningly the priority of ghetto-serving and institution-preserving corporate commitments.

Furthermore, it is clear to anyone who looks fairly at the situation that the efforts being made by non-religious and even by non-Christians

to create a better world are often at least as evangelical in goal, content, and methods as the efforts of religious. Religious are not the only people interested in the salvation of the world, and often their long history of world-denial has made them less capable of grasping the world-transforming vision of Vatican II and less adept at implementing that vision than people who have participated all their lives in the world process that most religious renounced at an early age.

The closed system is dissolving and religious are more and more caught up in the main stream of society and culture. Two results of this situation condition any contemporary consideration of the vows: 1) to make sense to themselves religious have to make sense to their contemporaries in the world (which is not the same thing, necessarily, as being approved of by the world); 2) to survive as religious in the main stream it is imperative that religious articulate a new relationship to the world which is neither simply absorption nor the continuation of an adversary stance.

#### The Context: A Theology of Profession

As we have already noted, religious life has always involved profession, but the vows professed have varied. Consequently, the question of the meaning of the vows should be set in the context of the more basic question of the meaning of religious profession. Whatever vows are made and whatever their content and meaning is seen to be in any period, place, or congregation, they are and must be the specific expression of the general intentionality of the act of profession.

Profession is the act by which a person dedicates her/himself to God in Christ by permanent commitment in religious life. By this dedication the person is consecrated to God in a particular way. Giving to one's life the particular structure that is religious life means two things: 1) leaving behind or aside other possible structures (the "negative" dimension); 2) freely tending toward growth and maturity in the way chosen (the "positive" dimension). The classical expression of these two dimensions has been "leaving the world" and "tending to perfection". The first meant renunciation of the world and the second meant attending to one's personal sanctification and to the salvation of souls through the apostolic work of the congregation.

Obviously, "leaving the world" and, to some extent at least, an individualistic and/or institutional "pursuit of perfection" are difficult to harmonize with a Conciliar understanding of what Christian life is all about. This raises a perfectly legitimate question which will not unsettle anyone who is somewhat familiar with the long and varied history of religious life. The question is simply, how can religious profession be understood and explained today in terms which are faithful both to the basic meaning of profession as commitment to Christ in religious life and to the contemporary spiritual experience of both the dimensions of that commitment?



What stance toward the world does one take by entering religious life today? Clearly, by refusing to "build oneself into" the familial, economic, and political structures of the surrounding society the person has taken an independent stance. It is not one of "flight" or of "separation." But it is also not one of simply belonging. It is, ideally, one of prophetic presence. Some people have referred to it as a "counter-culture" stance. I once called it a stance of "creative disengagement."<sup>6</sup> Whatever we choose to call it, we mean that religious try to maintain a certain personal and corporate liberty in regard to the basic structures and dynamisms of the world, a liberty which will enable them to bring to bear upon its forms and activities the evangelical values which must transform the world. The specific relationship between the individual religious and/or congregation and the particular structures and activities in their sector of the world may be one of the condemning outright evil, criticizing the inadequate, clarifying the ambiguous, cooperating with the good, or some combination of these. The important thing is that religious attempt to structure their lives in such a way that they have the necessary liberty to relate prophetically to the world. Prophetic presence requires contemplative insight and courageous action. These, it might be argued, are the contemporary analogue of flight or separation from the world.

To what do religious positively commit themselves by entering religious life today? Perhaps we could say they commit themselves to the great work of transformation that began with the Incarnation and which takes its meaning and structure from that central salvific event. Personal transformation in Christ is certainly integral to this commitment but in the experience of the contemporary religious the transformation of the world and all its people is equally integral and in no sense a "secondary end." This entire process of transformation in Christ is seen as essentially communal, and "community" cannot be defined as institutional togetherness nor as exclusively congregational. On the contrary, the contemporary religious demands both a more authentic community life within the congregation and a deeper community involvement with those who are not members of the congregation.

In summary, religious profession today is essentially what it has always been, a dedication of the person to God in Christ within religious life. It continues to involve the adoption of a particular stance toward the world which is not simply one of belonging to the world on its own terms, and a commitment to a particular positive seeking of life in Christ. What has changed is the understanding of both dimensions. The adversary stance toward the world has given way to a prophetic stance. The commitment to seeking personal perfection and the salvation of souls has become a commitment to the transformation of all things and people (including oneself) in Christ. It is in the context of the meaning of contemporary religious profession as the initiating act of religious life that we can raise the question about the contemporary meaning of the vows.

#### The Specification: A Theology of the Vows

Most religious today profess the traditional vows of poverty, chastity or celibacy, and obedience. By means of these vows both dimensions



of religious profession, the stance toward the world and the commitment to the transformation of the world in Christ, are specified. The traditional three vows locate this specification in the attitude and behavior of the religious in the areas of the three major dimensions of human life (possession, affectivity, and power) which are simultaneously the three major areas of human interaction which structure the world (economics, social life, and politics). Traditional theology of the vows has already attended to the first aspect, the capacity of the vows to direct one's personal energies toward God. But it is only contemporary reflection which has highlighted the potential of the vows for enabling the religious to play a significant role in the transformation of the very structures of the world through an evangelical contribution to the major areas of human interaction. Furthermore, the more one reflects on this latter aspect the clearer it becomes that the two aspects, while distinct, are not separate, anymore than the prophetic stance toward the world and the commitment to the transformation of all things in Christ are separate. This awareness of the integration of the religious project is perhaps one of the contributions of contemporary experience to the understanding of religious life.

### Poverty

When the twentieth century American over the age of forty tries to think about material goods s/he has to be aware of the kaleidoscopic transformations in the economy that have taken place in a generation and a half. From an economy of scarcity which reached agonizing proportions in the depression era through an economy of abundance that the post-war generation incarnated in a throw-away culture we have come to a realistic understanding of an economy of finitude.

Material resources are not infinite and we will either use them responsibly or we and/or our children will not have the means to live at all on this planet. This realization has changed our attitudes toward material goods. Goods are resources and that means they are to be used for and not just used up. Furthermore, not all of the projects which resources can serve are equally worthwhile and since the resources are not infinite choices have to be made.

Religious were not the first, much less the only, people to realize that, as a cosmic community, we must undergo a conversion in the area of attitude and behavior toward material goods, from an attitude of mindless exploitation to one of responsible stewardship. Not far behind this realization came the conviction that the inequity of distribution of material goods and the resultant domination of the poor by the rich is an intolerable source of the edge-of-doom situation in which we live. In other words, the human race is beginning to see that the establishment of a sane and healthy relationship between finite material resources and the quality of life for all people is crucial to the survival of the race and of the planet. How to establish such a relationship, given the obvious headstart of selfishness, exploitation, crass irresponsibility, domination, and the structures which institutionalize them, is a staggering problem.



If the religious vow of poverty is going to make sense today, even to religious themselves, to say nothing of other people, it cannot continue to be understood as a private reality operating in the closed system that the religious subculture once created. It has to relate the religious enterprise to the enormous human project of organizing material resources for the creation of a genuinely human world. Religious poverty has to clearly cast the weight of Christianity into the balance on the side of responsible stewardship, institutional reform, and the liberation of the poor. But even more importantly it should help to surface and explicitate the potentially evangelical values in this world struggle for a human economy and contribute an evangelical dimension where none yet exists.

To build the evangelical dimension into the contemporary economic struggle does not mean simply to baptize with piety what is already going on. It means to contribute to the effort not only by cooperation, criticism, or condemnation but by a mode of behavior which arises directly from a Gospel poverty of spirit, itself the fruit of a profound experience of God's gift to us in Jesus. The contemporary religious who experiences all as gift will transcend not only the excess of having but perhaps also the facility of giving and find a Gospel mode of sharing. To be preoccupied with having means to dispossess others. Outright giving, in our society, often places the receiver in the position of a grateful subordinate. To share means to enter into relationship with the other on the basis of recognition that the other has a right to participate in the gift of God to his people, that we have no right to more than we need when another is in want. Sharing is more than the equitable distribution of goods. It is a recognition of our common life as children of the same God and a concrete living of that common life.

It is not easy to work out what the vow of poverty means in today's world. In principle it means to participate prophetically in the human effort to convert the race from exploitation to responsible stewardship, to liberate the poor by an equitable distribution of goods, to create the economic structures which will effectively relate finite resources to human ends. But it also means to model a sharing of life through a sharing of goods that expresses a Christian experience of poverty of spirit. In the concrete it probably means a re-evaluation of holdings and life-styles and an abandonment of the privatized exclusivity of the religious subculture. To work out the details of such an approach will not be easy. But a poverty of this kind which renounces both the childish irrelevance of an artificial dependence and the romanticism of a useless and unreal imitation of the destitute and concentrates on alleviating misery while building the structures of human solidarity can make sense to the religious who vows poverty today. And, although the world will undoubtedly not always like what religious are doing in this area it will at least have to take it seriously.

### Celibacy

The vow of celibacy was once the least ambiguous of the three. It regulated affectivity by almost total denial, if not outright repression,



and its obligations were perfectly clear. It was relatively simple to maintain this situation as long as religious life remained a closed system. But today celibacy has to be thought about in the context of the affective revolution that characterizes our time. This revolution includes not only run-away eroticism and its negative corollaries but also a valid liberation of both women and men from sexually stereotyped roles and life styles, the movement for the rights of sexual minorities, the struggle for the liberation and equal rights of women. We are mid-stream in a major cultural conversion from a basically one-sex, male-dominated society (and Church) to a two-sex society characterized by responsible mutuality. The person who vows celibacy for evangelical reasons is in a unique position to contribute to this positive transformation of society.

It has already become relatively clear that celibate women, especially when organized in religious communities, are in an extraordinarily good position to challenge male domination and to foster the emergence of women as equal collaborators in every sphere of life and work. Despite the long history of sacramental subjugation and ministerial exploitation of religious women within the Church it is a fact that, both individually and as groups, religious women constitute an educated, disciplined, productive, and relatively independent force which is exercising a genuinely prophetic role in the Church and in society. Unmarried women generally have both more opportunities for developing competitive competencies and more affective and social freedom to experiment and take risks in achieving personal and corporate effectiveness. Religious have the added advantage of corporate resources and outlets for maximizing such possibilities.

A parallel phenomenon is observable among religious men. Despite the locker-room ethos that all-male living tends to create and the "machismo" chauvinism that was systematically bred into many male religious as a protection, on the one hand, against sexual delinquency, and, on the other hand, of male supremacy and the status quo in the Church, religious men are rapidly emerging as a major force in the struggle for a new, sexually balanced Church and world. They have more opportunity than most of their married colleagues to meet and work with talented women and more psychological space to come to grips with their own problems in the area of relationships with women.

Although religious are playing a genuinely prophetic role in the affective transformation of society, many men and women celibates find it much more difficult to tackle their own personal affective transformation. Intimacy, with people of their own or the other sex, is unfamiliar territory for many religious. Much of the affective energy which was sublimated into compulsive work for many years is hard to tap for the development of loving relationships with other individuals and within community. A long indoctrination in avoidance of deep relationships with those outside the community has made it unusually difficult for many religious to enter freely into close friendships with non-members. Lack of experience with their own affective response causes upsetting reactions



when religious who have allowed themselves virtually no affective expression since early adolescence find themselves suddenly in a two-sex world. Vocational disasters have been frequent enough in the last few years to give even the non-scrupulous some pause. Nevertheless, one senses a general commitment among women and men religious to their own sexual and affective maturation and to the creation of loving communities which bodes well for the future of religious life.

Again, it must be remarked that religious are latecomers to the affective revolution that is underway in our society. Religious celibates are being called to participation and cooperation in a positive dynamism which is at work in our culture. But if the participation of religious is to be evangelically prophetic it must be based on a deep religious experience of being loved by God in Jesus and an experienced personal fulfillment in returning that love. The Gospel purity of heart which religious can bring to the affective transformation of the world and the Church is more than just the expression of a well developed personality. It is the expression in interpersonal and community relationships of an affectivity that has been radically healed, purified, and liberated in the intimacy of a profound personal and communal prayer life.

In the area of celibacy, as in that of poverty, the vow will make sense to the contemporary religious if it leads the person toward personal transformation in love and allows the person to participate meaningfully in the emergence of a new, whole, and loving world characterized by responsible intimacy, equality, and mutuality. What this means in the concrete is less easy to determine. The renewal of community life has been underway for some time and seems to be the first expression of a new understanding of celibacy. It would seem that re-evaluation of totally one-sex formation programs and apostolates is also necessary as well as some experimentation with less isolated living patterns for adult religious. Individual and corporate efforts to break down patterns of male dominance and to establish patterns of equality and collaboration would seem to be an integral part of what vowed celibacy today is all about.

If celibacy comes to mean not simply sexual denial but a total commitment to the creation of a genuine world community and, within that global enterprise, a commitment to becoming an ever more loving human being it will not cease to be baffling to a world largely structured by selfishness, or offensive to the proponents of unrestrained eroticism, but it will have to be taken seriously as a significant human venture.

### Obedience

It has become almost a cliché to speak of the crisis of authority and obedience, not only in religious life but in the Church and society at large. This is the context of any contemporary discussion of the vow of obedience. The crisis is much deeper than some proponents of a restoration of the ancien régime would like to think. It is not simply that those in authority are exercising authority badly or that those who should



be obeying lack faith, humility, or some other virtue (although both are sometimes true). It is that the principle of hierarchy, which is traditionally the nerve of both secular and religious obedience, is being radically questioned and the principle of participation is supplanting it in more and more sectors of life. Because it has traditionally been thought that the Church is hierarchical by divine institution and that nothing can or will ever really change this, many people simply do not attend to the real nature and seriousness of this changing perception of the nature of human relationships.<sup>7</sup>

A hierarchical organization of a society is one in which some members are thought to be really, intrinsically, personally, and relatively permanently superior to the others. However the person came to be in the superior position, whether by conquest, birth, appointment, election, or something else, his/her authority is thought to be a participation in divine authority, to be divinely sanctioned. The basic principle is that all legitimate authority comes from God and thus that obedience is a sacred duty. In religious communities the sacralizing of authority has been carried to its extreme in the concept of the superior literally holding the place of Christ, speaking in the name of God, and communicating the will of God for the subject, even when the superior's command is objectively wrong.

A participative organization of a society is one in which all members are considered to be intrinsically equal. If, for the good of all, someone is given a position of superiority, it is provisional, temporary, limited in scope, functional, and above all "secular" in the sense of non-sacralized. The person is first among equals in a particular domain of community life but not the representative of God to the others. Obedience in such a context is not submission but cooperation, which might be every bit as demanding as submission if it is taken seriously. The members of the group never abdicate personal responsibility either for themselves and their own actions or for the group as a whole.

It is important to realize that the distinction being drawn here is not between monarchy and democracy, as some seem to conclude as soon as the traditional model is questioned. Both monarchy and democracy can be hierarchical, and both can be participative. The real difference is not in the form of government selected but in the belief regarding the nature, source, and location of authority. If the authority is thought to be somehow God's authority communicated directly to and exercised by the superior in regard to those who do not share in God's authority but submit to it, the system is hierarchical. If the authority is thought to be the community's authority (divine or human in its source) which the community chooses to exercise through one of its members, the system is essentially participative. In the former case the terminology of "superior" and "subject" is completely accurate. In the latter there is a real and fundamental equality among the members which is not negated by the appointment of someone to an office and which makes the use of superior/subject terminology both offensive and inaccurate.



To an ever greater degree societies are rejecting the hierarchical principle as a valid way of organizing social and political life. It is part of the rejection of domination and of the espousal of liberation and self-determination. It is the fruit not simply of the desire of people to control their own lives and destinies but also of a fundamental conviction regarding the intrinsic equality of all persons and of a growing sense of the inalienability of personal responsibility.

Members of the Church and religious are not immune from these currents of contemporary experience. In many ways the efforts to understand and practice collegiality constitute a move away at least from the monarchical understanding of hierarchy and toward a more participative practice. Many religious communities of women, and some of men, have largely abandoned, in practice if not in theory, the hierarchical understanding of religious life. This process is being intensified by the alignment of religious as individuals and as groups, with the liberation efforts going on about them. They are absorbing the theory and practice of liberation theology and adjusting it to the North American scene. The implications for the organization of the local and universal Church, as well as religious life, are difficult to ignore.

Obedience is certainly the vow which presents the greatest challenge for the development of a contemporary theology of religious life. It seems to run counter to the most important and positive social movements of our times. If, however, the fundamental intentionality of obedience can be reappropriated by contemporary religious it is not inconceivable that obedience will make a prophetic contribution to the struggle for liberation. Religious have always made a vow of obedience as the best way to promote their own true freedom. They have been convinced that in God's will is true peace, within ourselves and among ourselves. Religious obedience is a dedication to freedom, not to subjection or servitude. It is as true today as it has ever been that true freedom is to be found in the carrying out of the will of God, even if religious, along with the rest of the human race, are coming gradually to see that obedience to God cannot be handled as simply as a traditional theology of obedience would suggest.

What religious can bring to the worldwide struggle against domination is a deep hunger and thirst for justice based on their own spiritual experience of liberation in Jesus Christ. Religious are people who know that justice and holiness are finally identical, and that justice is not simply the way humans can and should relate to one another. It is, first of all, a capacity to relate to each other as brothers and sisters which is given to us by the God who created and redeemed us all.

It might be suggested that religious should be on the cutting edge in the development of new forms of community life and organization structured by and for justice. Here if anywhere it makes sense for the members to trust one another and thus to be able to abandon all forms of domination, coercion, intolerance, and forced conformity. Religious communities are social groups in which the equality recognized among the members is



explicitly seen to be equality not only as human beings but as creatures and children of the same God redeemed by the same Christ. They should be a prophetic witness that it is possible for a group of people to live together in love and justice celebrating their own freedom and equality in the very act of celebrating God's absolute and respectful dominion in their lives. Their community life and organization should explicitate the relationship between seeking God's will and experiencing human freedom (which has always been the real meaning of religious obedience), between accepting responsibility for oneself and putting one's life at the service of the other and of the common good (which is the Gospel meaning of maturity).

If to vow obedience meant to commit oneself to a personal quest for freedom and holiness in a community context and to involve oneself in the broader human quest for the liberation of all people both by a prophetic challenge to structures of domination and by a constructive participation in the evolution of new models of community the vow would make sense not only to religious but to their contemporaries.

The practical implications of such an understanding are already being worked out by some communities. The quest for personal freedom demands a different kind of initial formation in which choice situations are multiplied rather than suppressed, in which responsibility is heightened rather than diminished, and in which subsequent evaluation is individualized and intensified. It requires a much deeper personal prayer life, different and better forms of spiritual direction, and a commitment to lifelong formation.

Participation in the wider human quest for liberation will demand, first of all, a serious re-evaluation of community structures. It calls for the abandonment of all forms of domination and oppression within communities, a reduction of appeal to coercion and use of power to induce conformity, the development of freedom of assembly and discussion, the abolition of prior censorship, and the establishment of due process. In other words, as the 1971 Synod of Bishops candidly recognized in regard to the Church, our witness to justice and the quest of human liberation will not be credible until injustice and the last vestiges of totalitarianism have been rooted out of our communities.

The institutions which religious own, direct, or serve also raise the challenge of justice and freedom. The justice of hiring policies, the recognition and protection of the rights of employees and clients, the integrity of investment policies are among the justice concerns which touch the religious community directly. But the concern for justice and liberation cannot stop with the community or its institutions. The financial and personnel commitments of religious congregations must express the priority assigned to the quest for justice. As the Synod of Bishops put it, "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel ...." (#6). Religious obedience has



always been understood as a quest for true freedom and as the way in which the individual religious was integrated into the congregation's apostolate of preaching the Gospel. It would seem that, at the deepest level, this is still what it means. What has changed most, perhaps, is our understanding of freedom and of what it means to preach the Gospel. As religious interiorize new understandings in these areas and incorporate them into their understanding and practice of the vow of obedience the vow itself can become intelligible to our contemporaries and more significant to religious themselves.

### Conclusion

It would seem useful, at this point, to summarize this rather lengthy article which has tried to argue that it is possible to reinterpret the traditional religious vows in a way which would be, on the one hand, consistent with the tradition and, on the other hand, more in touch with contemporary experience. The crisis regarding the vows arises in large part from the fact that religious life, like the life of the Church itself, has been resituated by Vatican II in, with, and for the world. One result of this resituation is that religious life is no longer a closed system operating in isolation from or in opposition to an alien and even hostile world. Religious life in general, and the vows in particular, can no longer make sense to religious themselves if they are seen as totally irrelevant to the world and to the process of transformation that the world is undergoing.

Traditionally, profession of vows, as the act initiating religious life, has meant assuming a particular prophetic stance toward the world, namely renunciation, and committing oneself in some way to one's own salvation and that of the neighbor. Profession today seems to have basically the same meaning. By this act of self-dedication the religious assumes a certain prophetic stance toward the world, a critical but involved one, and commits him/herself to the transformation of the world, including him or herself.

The vows, as we have tried to show, can be seen as ways not only of giving prophetic witness against the chief perversions of the basic human energies of possession, affectivity, and power, but also of committing oneself to fostering the most positive forces of transformation at work in the world. They can be ways of integrating the evangelical dimension into the struggle to convert society and to transform the world into a human and ultimately holy habitation for human beings. They can constitute concrete modes of fostering the movements from exploitation of material resources to responsible stewardship in a finite universe; from a male-dominated and selfish society to one structured by mutuality and orientated toward responsible intimacy; from a social order characterized by domination and coercion of the weak by the strong to one in which people participatively and cooperatively seek the maximum of freedom and justice for every person.

Practically, this selective cooperation of religious with the major positive dynamisms in our society will demand a re-evaluation of traditional commitments and a redirection of personnel and material resources. Religious will be less frequently operating and staffing parallel institutions and more frequently cooperating in ventures they do not control but must influence in virtue of competence rather than their ownership.

Even more importantly, it will demand a different type of formation and professional preparation of candidates. Twentieth century religious will not have the advantages or support of the sociology of knowledge and conviction that living in the total institution provided in the past, and they will be able to influence the larger society only to the extent that they have something to offer, personally and professionally.

Finally, contemporary religious life demands a new type of leadership which sees itself as enabling rather than dominative and which knows that genuine authority is coextensive with competence and not to be confused with jurisdiction.

Religious life is at the crossroads. Many are asking if it will survive or disappear. Whether it retreats into the ghetto and attracts rigid, frightened, and structure-seeking dependency types, or moves forward to meet the challenge of prophetic presence and creative involvement in the world and attracts freedom-seeking, radical types, it will probably survive. In fact, one might hypothesize that there are more weak than strong people in any society and that, if survival is the question, the chances for quantitative increase of the ghetto congregations is actually better. But the question is not simply one of survival in the sense of duration. It is a question of meaning. Will religious life continue to be a significant evangelical force in the world? The answer to that question is much less certain.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The first unambiguous reference to a public promise of celibacy occurs in Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - c.215), Stromatum III. However, the reference in the First Apology of Justin Martyr (c. 150AD), to "men and women, disciples of Christ since their childhood, (who) have remained virgins to the age of sixty or seventy" suggests that some public profession of celibacy was made even in the first century. For full references and more complete analyses of these and other early texts on religious profession see my article, "Non-marriage for the Sake of the Kingdom." Widening the Dialogue ("Vita Evangelica" Series - No. 6) (Ottawa/Washington, D.C.: CRC and LCWR, 1974) 125-197.

<sup>2</sup>The Rule of St. Benedict, for example, specifies that the monk is to make vows of stability, conversion of manners, and obedience. Most religious congregations today profess poverty, chastity, and obedience and some have a fourth vow.

<sup>3</sup>It suffices to compare Benedict's notion of obedience essentially qualified by stability, with Ignatius' notion of obedience as readiness to be sent anywhere on mission to see how differently the same vow could be understood.

<sup>4</sup>It is important to realize, however, that the earliest consecrated virgins and celibates did not separate themselves from the community by any of the means later adopted by desert monasticism. And, despite fairly consistent official opposition, religious life has been steadily moving since the 1500's back from the desert to the city.

<sup>5</sup>The frequently reiterated position of the Sacred Congregation for Religious as well as most papal statements (e.g. Evangelica Testificatio) on religious life since the Council bear continuous witness to the fact that the official theory of religious life is far behind both the Council's ecclesiology and the practical aggiornamento that has taken place in religious life.

<sup>6</sup>S.M. Schneiders, IHM, "Celibacy--Creative Disengagement," Sisters Today (Dec. 1969) 191-200.

<sup>7</sup>The Theological question of whether the Church really is hierarchical by divine institution or in what sense this might be so needs to be seriously addressed. Simply repeating the proposition does not illumine the present situation very much especially when the people repeating it think of hierarchy as meaning substantially the kind of organization which now obtains in the Church.

<sup>8</sup>See "Justice in the World," the Document published by The World Synod of Bishops (Nov. 30, 1971).